

Wilson could already hear the music. Slouched in the seat with his arms crossed over his chest, he eyed the doorway leading into the brightly lit dance hall. The door of doom.

Freddy was whistling a jaunty tune as he got out of the car. He came around to the passenger side of the car, opened the door and walked away with a cheerful “Everybody out!”

Wilson could slam the door shut and just stay in the car but it was awfully cold. And there could be free food in that place, at least. He took a deep breath, nodded inanely to himself and headed into the building.

The interior was all a hot crush of bodies and babble of overlapping talk that nearly drowned out the music. He found a narrow cushion of space around the edges of the crowd and slipped into it. Pairs of people were swinging each other around, all frothing skirts and dapper young gentlemen. They certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves. Freddy was already nowhere to be seen.

Dodging the dancers, he went on a search for the refreshment table. This took a good ten minutes, it was so crowded, but finally he found it just as he was beginning to fear there wasn’t one. A long table with a white cloth and an unimpressive spread.

There were deviled eggs. He popped one into his mouth, it was room temperature and oddly seasoned. Perhaps he’d stick to the lemon cakes. He loaded four onto a plate and pressed his back to the nearest wall. The cakes were a touch dry and heavy, but they were free.

A catchy little ragtime number was playing and somewhere between the second and third cake he had to stop his foot from tapping. Everyone out on the floor was beaming with enjoyment. Freddy would want to stay for hours, it would be a long, cold walk back home if Wilson didn’t wait for a ride, and there was nothing really

pressing for him to do back home anyway... it was going to be a long, boring evening regardless of where he was, so he may as well stay and gorge himself on stale refreshments.

Nearby a group of three pretty young women were talking to each other. None of them appeared to have partners. Wilson drifted closer to them. No particular reason. He was only planning to eat the rest of the lemon cakes and go look for anything better to eat that he may have passed up. Nothing more...

None of the ladies looked his way. One of them held a dance card in her hand and was showing it to her friends. He saw a lot of blank spaces on it. He glanced back out at the floor. They all looked like they were having fun out there. Now, Wilson didn't dance ever. And he had always assumed that he would hate it. But biased, dogmatic opinions weren't good science, and he had no alternative for entertainment. He hadn't even brought a book or anything.

He cleared his throat. The women edged away. Ah. That wasn't a promising sign, but perhaps they thought he was trying to signal that they were in the way! Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

He cleared his throat again, it was suddenly dry. "This is nice music, isn't it?"

The three women all looked at him and then at each other. A still, small voice inside said: *They don't want to dance with me.* And an illogical corollary: *No one will want to dance with me.* Hmph. He was smart, decently dressed, and not half bad looking. Nice hair, too. Someone would want to. Someone was probably watching him right now hoping he'd ask, even!

"I'm sorry, sir, my dance card is full," one of the women said in a soft voice. The one on the right. Was she the one he'd seen with the empty card? No, probably not, she wouldn't lie, right?

They were all eyeing him and not in a flattering way. His ears were burning.

“Sure! I understand completely! I’ll just be over here, then, in case you want to find me later.”

And back to the food table with him. There was lemonade in a pitcher. He sampled a bit and found it was, unfortunately, just lemonade. Plain, non-enhanced lemonade. He downed a cup of it anyway. Then another. He wasn’t thirsty and it wasn’t particularly fantastic lemonade, but there wasn’t much else to do.

When he looked up from the empty glass he saw a familiar face by the wall. A dour face. A face having just as rotten of a time as he was! He headed for her like she was a life raft.

“Miss Warder! Good evening!”

She looked startled. “Mr. Higgsbury. Hello. I did not expect to find you at such an occasion.” It was really her, though! Tall- plain black dress- hazel eyes that saw into one’s soul- nut-brown hair.

“This is the last place I thought I’d see you! I don’t want to be here, you know. I would much rather study than dance. And I don’t really like to study! Not that I’m not a good student. Do you prefer dancing to studying? I won’t hold it against you if you do.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I’m afraid a housemate brought me here.”

“Ah! Yes! My cousin refused to take me home and I don’t have a motorcar-” He realized just then that he was talking too much, and about nothing, and so he stopped talking.

Miss Warder looked down, arranging her gloves. A gesture with the potential to be shy or demure was, on her, quite businesslike. “So I see.”

He bit his lip. He had only ever spoken to her to discuss class material. He had not the faintest idea how to make small talk. "It's cold, isn't it?"

"I find it rather close, myself."

"I meant it's cold outside, is what I meant."

"Ah. So it is." She looked him over. "You have a slight frame. I suppose you're predisposed to feel the cold."

"Not particularly, but--"

"You ought to take care of yourself. It would be terribly inconvenient if you were to carry germs into the classroom and infect your fellows."

"Well, I try." He swallowed. "What have you been doing to keep yourself entertained?"

"I watch," she said, looking out at the dance floor.

He looked at her wrist. "You don't have a dance card!"

"I did not take one."

"Perhaps you thought no one would fill it?"

"On the contrary," she said. "I did not wish to have to fend them off."

"I see!" Was that a joke? It didn't sound like one.

She watched the figures on the dance floor. She was always so methodical, that woman. No doubt it was how she had ended up in the medical program despite being female. She seemed to be at the top of the class, too. Certainly she was doing better than Wilson. Yes- quite a mind.

"I know a waltz," he said, while inwardly urging himself to please shut up already- "I learnt in school! You know, as a kid. In England. It's an English waltz- my father is English."

“I see. Perhaps you’ll go and show it to one of the women here,” she said. “I’m certain there’s someone who needs a partner.”

“Oh. Yes,” he said quickly. “I’m sure there must be...”

She leaned forward and peered into his face. “I’ve upset you.”

He twiddled his thumbs and averted his gaze. “Perish the thought.”

“You were asking me to dance.”

“Me? You?”

“I did not mean to upset you, Mr. Higgsbury,” she said, “I have no interest in waltzing with anyone. I do not find you objectionable but I shan’t be dancing with you. I believe your time would be better spent elsewhere. Good evening.”

At least she was being nice about it. “Good evening.”

He went to find a corner to sit in and wait for the night to be over. He found one and made himself comfortable. He might not stay comfortable for long, he’d chugged two glasses of lemonade and didn’t know where the W.C. was around here. Miss Warder probably knew, he could ask her as a very last resort.

Amid the sea of twirling people, it came to his attention that there was a timid pale little face lurking in the opposite corner of the room. Wilson started nibbling on a hangnail. She looked as if she might be waiting for someone to ask her to dance.

Too bad Wilson didn’t even want to dance and hadn’t ever wanted to dance! He hadn’t planned to be here at all. His time would be best spent just sitting here and not even bothering with any of this nonsense, and next time Fred took him anywhere he would put his foot down, and-

He sidled up to her. “Good evening!”

She turned large, frightened eyes to him. She had a little pointed chin and nose, a rosebud mouth, jet black hair and wide almond-shaped eyes of a striking green.

Wilson's shoes were scuffed and he'd missed most of the under-chin area when he'd shaved that morning.

He stood stock still for a moment as his brain did absolutely nothing and then what came out of his mouth was "You're foxy, wanna trot with me?" The girl just looked away. He backed away. "Sorry about that, I'll go now." And with that, he would go outside and wait in the darn motorcar in thirty-degree weather! That was clearly the best course of action!

While navigating the musical obstacle course that was the dance floor he spotted Fred, spinning about with a girl who looked like Mary Pickford. They were both laughing giddily. Empty-headed fools...

"So! How was it?"

Wilson looked up over the small cloud made by his breath. "It wasn't my style, Freddy. I'd really rather you brought me home instead of making me go to these places. I didn't have a good time."

Fred rolled his eyes. "Of course not, I'll wager you didn't speak a word to anyone the entire evening."

Wilson said nothing.

"You'll die alone," Fred said, "a miserable little miser with a microscope." He began to crank up the automobile.

Wilson looked outside at the stars. "I don't use a microscope all that often," he mumbled. "I'm more of a chemist."

"The alone part was the relevant part, my good chum."

"Yes, yes, I get it." He closed his eyes.

“Do you wanna dance?”

Wilson looked up, blinking. The voice had come from quite close by but surely it wasn't directed to him! He had not expected anyone to come over here, away from the festivities under the shade of what could charitably be called birch trees. But in that case, there was no one else here to ask to dance, either.

Willow had been whirling to the sound of that instrumental whatchamacallit that Wes and Wigfrid were taking turns playing. Now she was over here with bright eyes and rosy cheeks. Wilson looked behind him in case there was someone else there, though he was pretty sure there wasn't.

“Well, do you?” she prompted. “You wanna do something besides sit around over here all alone while we have fun without ya, right?”

Wilson continued to blink stupidly at her. “I'm not exactly the life of the party”

“That's okay! I'm fun enough for the both of us!” She grabbed his arm, hauling him to his feet.

His feet let her lead him to the dance floor while his mouth said “I'm really not much of a dancer! You're probably going to have a few regrets-”

“Aw, it's not hard, Mr. Higgsbury!” That was Webber, dancing with Wendy on the corner of the patchwork surface Wickerbottom had spread out for a dance floor. “It's fun!”

“ ‘Fun,’ ” said Wendy, with no expression. Abigail twirled like a top by her side. The patchworky stuff was kind of lumpy, but it looked like it was holding up well. Wilson had helped put it together, dyeing squares with berry juice and sewing some of them up. Just because he hated parties didn't mean he didn't want the others to have fun. Not that he could have said no to Wickerbottom if he'd wanted to anyway!

Willow started moving around. Wilson stood like a lump. Wickerbottom was dancing a waltz with, of all people, Wolfgang, and they were both remarkably, unexpectedly graceful- if completely out of time to the music. Woodie was sitting by the edge of the floor, clapping along with the song that Wes was playing at a furious pace. Wigfrid was doing some kind of war dance next to him.

WX-78 and Maxwell were standing nearby, awkwardly eyeing one another. Upon seeing them Wilson had two thoughts almost simultaneously: first, he hadn't been the only wallflower, and second, he had been putting himself in the same category as the self-proclaimed evildoers. And a third: both of those two were about to watch him try to dance. Maybe he should refuse.

On one hand, clearly no one was going to care if he danced badly apart from possibly the two whose opinions he cared about least in the world. But on the other hand Willow was surely just asking him to be nice. Maybe she was even *hoping* he'd refuse, although it seemed as if she could have gotten away with his earlier protests if she was...

"Aw, geez. C'mon." Willow took Wilson's right hand in her own- firm, dry, rough with callus at the fingertips and the heel of the thumb- and guided it to the small of her back- a warm hollow. His left hand reached for her right hand as long-ago unwanted dance lessons came seeping back into his memory.

The music was a little too fast for him, but Wickerbottom and Wolfgang didn't seem to care about keeping in time (and neither did the whirling dervish that was Wendy's spectral sibling), so he would just go at his own pace, maybe, and hope Willow didn't mind him slowing her down, and he'd better not step on her feet- she was so close.



His hand was sweating onto hers. He could smell spice on her breath, she'd been eating monster meat chili.

Ah- she wasn't moving her feet?

"Wilson!" She pulled back and looked at him in alarm. Had he kicked her shin without noticing? Were his hands gross? Did he smell bad?

"Are you done already?" he asked.

"You do too know how to dance! And I don't! I kinda just thought we'd stand here and like, rock back and forth a little."

"Oh! Sorry about that, I didn't warn you about boarding school. We can rock back and forth!" Phew! He couldn't step on her feet if he didn't move his at all.

They rocked back and forth a little. Someone was playing music somewhere. It wasn't important.

"You're trembling," Willow said. "Am I scary?"

"Oh, you're terrifying, a flaming bolt of destruction."

"Hehe! I'm gonna get you!" She batted at his face. He flinched. "Geez, Wilson, don't be so nervous, it's just for fun. Look, no one else even knows how to dance!"

She pointed at Wolfgang, who had broken away from Wickerbottom and was squatting low to the ground, torso upright and arms crossed over his chest, and kicking his legs out in front of him. "Haha, what's he doin?"

"Wolfgang did this dance with bear in old country!" Wolfgang said.

"I'm sure the bear was impressed!" Wilson said.

"Bear was very impressed!"

"I see!" Wolfgang was getting out of breath, so Wilson would stop pestering him. He looked back at Willow. "I'm just not accustomed to this sort of thing, you know."

It struck him, suddenly, that she might think he was the one rejecting her, and he admitted: “I haven’t had a lot of practice with… well, people.”

“Here, I’ll help,” she said, and drew him closer- their chests were nearly touching. “Can’t get better until you get some practice,” she said in his ear.

They swayed to the music. Her hair smelled of burnt pine. She was humming softly, not along with the music but a completely different tune that she must prefer.

He had the strangest desire to turn and nuzzle her cheek. Well, maybe it wasn’t all that strange, but…

Here she was being so nice to him and his instinctive reaction was to take liberties? Yeesh. He was a cad. And yet. She was touching his face.

“You’re having fun now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I-” He felt somehow feverish but not ill. “Yes, er-”

A voice cut in. “YOU ARE BAD AT DANCING.” WX-78 was tapping its foot and looking as uncomfy as a robot could look. Beside it, Maxwell was picking gunk out from underneath his fingernails with a sharpened stick and glowering.

Wigfrid ran up to Wes and beckoned for the one-man band. He handed it over and she started shrieking opera and playing the music at full volume. Wendy did languid ballet moves while Abigail revolved around Webber in circles. Wickerbottom had begun to mimic Wolfgang’s squatting bear dance. Woodie was trying to waltz with his axe.

Wilson squeezed Willow’s hand. “This is the most fun I’ve ever had in my life.”